

*on the death of Peter Boyle*

A tragedy occurred at our Extraordinary General Meeting on Saturday morning at the City Halls. One of our members, Peter Boyle, a 58 year old man who suffered asbestosis, collapsed with a heart attack. The ambulance men arrived almost immediately and fought long and hard to save his life. They were assisted by some of our members. But sadly and tragically, all their efforts were unsuccessful. There are other asbestos victims here along with some non-victims who do support work in the office. We came here this morning to ask the Lord Provost to set an official inquiry into what happened and also to sign our Charter for the global ban of asbestos production.

Every asbestos victim suffers from a similar debilitating and progressive condition. We have to live and cope with the fact that we have progressive lung death, we cannot breathe in enough air to support physical exertion; besides everything else it affects our oxygen flow and the blood stream and it places abnormal strain on the heart. A great many of us are too badly ill to attend these meetings and are on constant intakes of oxygen. Even those of us who were able to attend here today cannot walk distances of more than 20 or 30 yards without stopping. Any staircase or hill is an obstacle to us. Anything that requires more than the minimal effort puts us under tremendous physical pressure. But we feel so strongly and are so outraged by what's happening to asbestos victims that we commit ourselves to trying to get the reality forced to the attention of the public, the politicians and the medical profession. One of our members on Saturday morning suffers mesothelioma, he is terminally ill. Another member was on a wheelchair. Others can only walk with the aid of sticks.

On Friday afternoon at half past four we phoned the City Halls and we had it confirmed that access for the disabled would be available from the 1st floor. When we got there on Saturday morning at quarter to ten the Candleriggs entrance was closed to us by the janitorial staff. This meant chronically disabled asbestos victims, and other elderly people were denied the use of the lift, forced to walk round to the Albion Street entrance and from there we had to climb a tortuous steep twisting staircase to the 3rd floor. A few had to turn back. Most of us who did manage it were in great physical

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<sup>1</sup> This was the one delivered to the television cameras inside the City Chambers in Glasgow

distress.

That was the situation on Saturday morning at Glasgow's City Halls. And ten minutes after the meeting started Peter Boyle collapsed with a heart attack and died, never having regained consciousness.

We are outraged by what happened. We are outraged by the utter lack of awareness from the authorities on the plight of asbestos victims, the utter lack of care and attention, outraged by the total lack of recognition of the reality of asbestos-related diseases. What happened on Saturday morning is an example of the general ignorance of the authorities. And this translates into callousness.

We urge the medical profession to help us in this crisis. Only they can get the message across properly to those in positions of power. Most of our time is spent trying to convince people that there is something wrong with us. Yet these diseases we have are incurable. All asbestos diseases are incurable. Our physical condition can only deteriorate until eventually we die. But we aren't even acknowledged to be chronically sick. We spend the last years, months, sometimes weeks, of our lives fighting to actually get diagnosed. Some of us are dead and still we haven't been diagnosed, not by the medical authorities. The only people who can change things are the doctors themselves.

And even when we are dead it isn't even guaranteed, for the sake of our widows and relatives, that post mortems are conducted. It happens everywhere else in Britain when there is the slightest possibility of industrial disease but here in Scotland, no, we aren't even allowed a post mortem as a formality. Yet the diseases we are dying from were caused by asbestos poisoning, through no fault of our own but by the ignorance or neglect of safety standards by the asbestos industry.

80% of us are denied disability benefit from the DSS. And even when we get the diagnosis from the DSS medical officers and obtain our disability benefit they describe what we have as "breathlessness". Even somebody with one of the terminal asbestos diseases, such as mesothelioma, somebody with a life expectancy of 6 months has their condition described as "breathlessness" by the DSS authorities.

That's an abuse of language by the authorities and this abuse of language is a mirror of the abuse of thousands of disabled and dying asbestos victims. Glasgow is lung cancer capital of the world. Why does no doctor or official ever mention asbestos in this connection? Eighty percent of asbestos cancers ARE lung cancers. Why do the

authorities never even refer to it?

Our EGM was called to discuss the crisis at Clydeside Action on Asbestos. We are the only group in this country to offer support and counsel to asbestos victims. We are self-financing. Without immediate support from the authorities we cannot survive. Most of the time and energy of our volunteer workers - victims and non-victims - is spent on welfare-rights work, trying to prove to the DSS authorities that we are entitled to disability benefits. We cannot cope with it. We cannot cope with the workload. This was the crisis that brought us to the EGM on Saturday morning and this is why Peter Boyle committed himself to attending with such a tragic outcome.

The majority of the volunteer workers are disabled victims. We asked for an emergency meeting with Fred Edwards, head of the Social Works Department. He passed down the communication. We were then advised that resources are very limited. We understand from them that there can be no special social services laid aside for asbestos victims. The only option offered to us is that more volunteers should come forward from our members to do the work themselves. They are offering to give us a half or full day training per week to maybe 10 or 12 so we can start doing each other's welfare rights work. The one problem is that again the authorities don't seem to appreciate or want to recognise that asbestos victims are chronically disabled people, that ultimately every asbestos disease is terminal. These are the people they are asking to come forward and do this work on a volunteer basis. It is disgraceful. If they're going to train us to do social and welfare rights work they'll have to take into account that on average three of our members die every month.

Peter Boyle was due to go to court this week in relation to his civil claim for damages against his former employer. Now that he is dead his family will lose the bulk of the claim. In Scotland as the law stands just now it only benefits the insurance companies and employers because of the Effect of Death on Damages. Surely a change in this law must come and must come soon. We ask the Lord Provost to sign the Asbestos Charter calling for a global ban on the production of the deadly fibre. This would bring us into line with Germany and Italy, and also with Sweden and Denmark who have already banned asbestos.

Members of the Swedish institute responsible for awarding the Nobel Prize are among hundreds of individuals who have already signed their names to our Charter. We ask that members of the medical profession pledge their fullest support. We ask



that every politician regardless of party loyalties signs the Charter. We ask trades union members and ordinary members of the public that they also sign the charter.

The asbestos crisis and the plight of the victims must be recognised. It is a terrible indictment of how things are that it takes the death of a man in these tragic circumstances to bring the matter to the attention of the authorities. The tragedy that occurred in Glasgow on Saturday morning must never be repeated anywhere in this country.

NB Eventually the Lord Provost agreed to speak to two representatives from Clydeside Action on Asbestos. It was explained to him that there were only some 25 of our members within the City Chambers surely it was possible that he could meet with us all. He agreed to this and the entire party met with himself and two officials. The Lord Provost said there was no public lift in the hall where the tragedy occurred, that the only lift was the one used for goods and services. This was the lift that might have been available to the disabled victims. He said that he would conduct his own inquiry into what occurred. In front of BBC television cameras he and his two colleagues signed the Asbestos Charter, calling for a global ban on the production of asbestos. See the pseudonymous article published following this for a fuller account.